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US effort to fight terror is reported

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WASHINGTON - The Reagan Administration is considering creating a high-level policy group in the White House to coordinate a worldwide war on terrorism, according to well-placed officials.

In addition, the new effort contemplates increasing resources to the Central Intelligence Agency to penetrate and collect advance information on the most worrisome of the terrorist groups and setting up special CIA and military counterterror teams that could try to disrupt planned operations or strike in reprisal.

"States that sponsor terrorism must be held accountable, both in terms of our publicly pointing the finger at them and in taking appropriate action," one senior official said. "They must no longer be able to feel this sort of activity is essentially risk-free."

The Administration, increasingly concerned that conventional responses have proven inadequate against state-sponsored terrorism, has been conducting a National Security Council study to come up with a plan. Some officials believe Iran was involved in the truck-bombing of the Marine barracks in Lebanon last fall.

Sources say President Ronald Reagan will be provided with options for a new program within the next few weeks.

While those working on the effort at the White House, State Department, Pentagon and CIA are unusually close-mouthed about it, the general outline of their thinking is as follows:

- Policy coordination at the top would be essential to ensure that only the President could authorize a disruption or reprisal mission. During the Kennedy Administration, a similar mechanism to what is contemplated, then known as the Special Group CI, coordinated counterinsurgency efforts in Central America, Southeast Asia and Africa. But since state-directed terrorism is a relatively new phenomenon, no such office has been established previously.

- The greatest amount of additional funding would go to expanding a network of agents to collect timely intelligence on the planning of terrorist groups thought to pose the greatest danger to the interests of the United States and its friends. Specialists say that repeated housecleanings of the CIA over the last several years have cut too deeply into its so-called human intelligence capabilities.

- Specially trained small civilian and military counterterrorist teams would be established to carry out assignments approved by the President. While assassinations would probably not be permitted, the teams would be authorized to use whatever force was necessary to disrupt a planned raid - such as trying to capture key terrorists or blow up trucks and warehouses that terrorists might use.

Dispute over intelligence

Commented one official: "If at the time of the Marine compound attack in Lebanon, we had in place small, specially trained military

units and had solid reason to believe the Iranians were involved and where they were, we could have gone in and taken them out.

"I don't think the international community would have had much to complain about - we would have been defending ourselves. And the US public wouldn't have complained either.

"You don't need evidence that would stand up in a court of law. What you need is information that is strong and convincing. And we had that."

Other officials dispute whether the intelligence was solid, as op-

posed to be circumstantial, especially in the days right after the incident. It was obvious from the President's statements that he wanted to react forcefully, but did not have the capability on hand.

Sources say that unless American military men were the target of terrorists, civilian CIA teams rather than military counterterror teams would be the appropriate instrument.

US might want to help

For example, officials say, if as a result of an escalation in the Iran-Iraq war, Iranian-sponsored terrorist squads targeted oil-pumping

stations or government ministries in Persian Gulf nations supporting Iraq, the United States could hardly make a case that its personnel had to be protected. But if a campaign of terror was beyond the capability of countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, or Bahrain to cope with, the United States might want to help counter the campaign to keep friendly governments from falling or oil supplies from being disrupted.

Specialists say that the threat of terrorism is greater now because governments are increasingly and directly involved in terrorist acts - using their intelligence agencies to plan operations, diplomatic pouches to carry weapons, explosives and money, and false diplomatic papers to move terrorists.

They cite Iran, Syria and Libya as being particularly active in those areas.

One official points out that even if the Iran-Iraq war was settled tomorrow, there would still be a serious problem as Iran tried to foment its fundamentalist revolution in countries with a substantial Shiite population. Iraq, Bahrain and North Yemen have a majority of Shiites, he said, and there are large minorities in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Turkey and Pakistan.

"Unless we develop a tried and true capability to get a handle on this problem, it will only grow in its scope and its impact," one official declared. "We want to be able to deter this form of warfare fully as much as nuclear or conventional war."